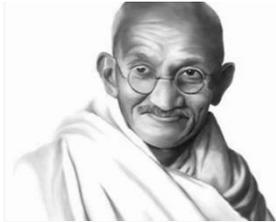


The Gandhian Approach to (Rural) Development

by Puja Mondal

The Gandhian Approach to Rural Development

In the Indian context, rural development may be defined as maximizing production in agriculture and allied activities in the rural areas including development of rural industries with emphasis on village and cottage industries.



It attaches importance to the generation of maximum possible employment opportunities in rural areas, especially for the weaker sections of the community to enable them to improve their standard of living.

Provision of certain basic amenities like drinking water, electricity, especially for the productive purpose, link roads connecting villages to market centers and facilities for health and education etc. figure prominently in the scheme of rural development.

Theoretically, Gandhian approach to rural development may be labelled as 'idealist'. It attaches supreme importance to moral values and gives primacy to moral values over material conditions. The Gandhians believe that the source of moral values in general lies in religion and Hindu scriptures like the Upanishads and the Gita, in particular.

The concept of 'Rama Rajya' is the basis of Gandhi's idea of an ideal social order. Gandhi defined Rama Rajya as "sovereignty of the people based on moral authority". He did not view Rama as a king, and people as his subjects. In the Gandhian scheme, 'Rama' stood for God or one's own 'inner voice' Gandhi believed in a democratic social order in which people are supreme. Their supremacy is, however, not absolute. It is subject to moral values.

Ideal Village

The village is the basic unit of the Gandhian ideal social order. Gandhi succinctly pointed out, "If the village perishes India will perish too.... We have to make a choice between India of the villages that is as ancient as herself and India of the cities which are a creation of foreign domination". Gandhi's ideal village belongs to the Pre-British period, when Indian villages were supposed to constitute the federation of self-governing autonomous republics.

According to Gandhiji, this federation will be brought about not by coercion or compulsion but by the voluntary offer of every village republic to join such a federation. The work of the central authority will only be to coordinate the work of different village republics and to supervise and manage things of common interest, as education, basic industries, health, currency, banking etc.

The central authority will have no power to enforce its decisions on village republics except the moral pressure or power of persuasion. The economic system and transport system introduced by the British have destroyed the "republican" character of the villages.

Gandhi, however, admitted that in olden times tyranny and oppression were in fact practised by feudal chiefs. But, "odds were even". Today the odds are heavy. It is most demoralizing." In this way in the Gandhian scheme of things the ancient 'republic', an Indian village without tyranny and exploitation serves as a model unit.

Decentralization

Gandhi firmly believes that village republics can be built only through decentralization of social and political power. In such a system decision-making power will be vested in the Village Panchayat rather than in the State and the national capital. The representatives would be elected by all adults for a fixed period of five years. The elected representatives would constitute a council, called the Panchayat.

The Panchayat exercises legislative, executive and judicial functions. It would look after education, health and sanitation of the village. It would be the Panchayats responsibility to protect and uplift 'untouchables' and other poor people. Resources for Gandhian Approach to managing village affairs would be raised from the villages.

All the conflicts and disputes would be resolved within the village. And as far as possible not a single case is to be referred to courts outside the village. The Panchayat would play its role in propagating the importance of moral and spiritual values among the rurality's for bringing about rural reconstruction.

Apart from managing its own affairs the village would also be capable of defending itself against any invasion. A non-violent peace brigade of volunteers would be organised to defend the village. This corps would be different from the usual military formation. They would repose the utmost faith in non-violence and God.

Self-sufficiency

Such a decentralized policy implies a decentralized economy. It can be attained only through self-sufficiency at the village level. The village should be self-sufficient as far as its basic needs – food, clothing, and other necessities – are concerned. The village has to import certain things which it cannot produce in the village. "We shall have to produce more of what we can, in order thereby to obtain in exchange, what we are unable to produce".

The village should produce food-crops and cotton in order to meet its requirements. Some lands should also be earmarked for cattle and for a playground for adults and children. If some land is still available, it should be used for growing useful cash crops like tobacco, opium, etc. to enable the village to get in exchange things which it does not produce.

Village economy should be planned with a view to providing full employment to all the adults of the village. Each man should be guaranteed employment to enable him to meet his basic needs in the village itself so that he is not forced to migrate to towns. In the ultimate analysis, full employment should be linked with equality.

Physical labour occupies a central place in the Gandhian concept of the self-sufficient village. In this respect, he was highly influenced by Rus-kin and Tolstoy. According to Gandhi, each man must do physical labour to earn his bread. Physical labor is necessary for moral discipline and for the sound development of the mind. Intellectual labour is only for one's own satisfaction and one should not demand payment for it.

The needs of the body must be supplied by the body. Gandhi said, "If all laboured for their bread then there would be enough food and enough leisure for all." Shriman Narayan rightly observes, "Gandhiji recognised toil to be not a curse but the joyful business of life as it has the power to make man healthier, merrier, fitter and kindlier".

Industrialization

Gandhiji maintained that industrialization would help only a few and will lead to concentration of economic power. Industrialization leads to passive or active exploitation of the villages. It encourages competition. Large scale production requires marketing. Marketing means profit-seeking through an exploitative mechanism.

Moreover, industrialization replaces manpower and hence it adds to unemployment. In a country like India, where millions of labourers in the villages do not get work for even six months in a year,

industrialization will not only increase unemployment but force labourers to migrate to urban areas. This will ruin villages.

In order to avoid such a catastrophe, village and cottage industries should be revived. They provide employment to meet the needs of the villagers and facilitate village self-sufficiency. Gandhians are not against machine per se if it meets two aims: self-sufficiency and full employment. According to Gandhi, there would be no objection to villagers using even the modern machines and tools that they could make and could afford to use. Only they should not be used as a means of exploitation of others.

Trusteeship

Gandhiji was not against the institution of private property. But he wanted to restrict the right of private property to what was necessary to yield an honourable livelihood. For the excess he prescribed the principle of trusteeship.

Gandhiji emphasized the principle of trusteeship in social and economic affairs. He firmly believed that all social property should be held in trust. The capitalists would take care not only of themselves but also of others. Some of their surplus wealth would be used for the rest of the society.

The poor workers, under trusteeship, would consider the capitalists as their benefactors; and would repose faith in their noble intentions. Gandhiji felt that if such a trusteeship were established, the welfare of the workers would increase and the clash between the workers and employers would be avoided. Trusteeship would help considerably "in realising a state of equality on earth."

Gandhiji firmly believed that land should not be owned by any individual. Land belongs to God. Hence, individual ownership of land should be shunned. For that a landowner should be persuaded to become a trustee of his land. He should be convinced that the land he owns does not belong to him. Land belongs to the community and must be used for the welfare of the community. They are merely trustees. By persuasion the heart of landowners should be changed and they should be induced to donate their land voluntarily.

If the land owners do not oblige and continue to exploit the poor workers, the latter should organise non-violent, non-cooperation, civil disobedience struggles against them. Gandhiji rightly held the view that "no person can amass wealth without the cooperation, willing or forced, of the people concerned".

If this knowledge were to penetrate and spread amongst the poor, they would become strong and learn how to free themselves from the crushing inequalities which have pushed them to the verge of starvation. But the oppressed should not take recourse to violent methods. In the Gandhian scheme of things, the principle of cooperation, love and service is most important and violence has no place in it. Violence is against "moral values" and civilized society is inconceivable in the absence of moral values.

Gandhiji's concept of development is oriented to the uplift of the common man. He preferred village habitats to megalopolises and Swadeshi craft to imported technology for the economic wellbeing of the common man. He stressed the need for cottage industries in place of gigantic industries and advocated for a decentralised economy instead of a centralised one.

He realised the need for integrated rural development and believed that education, health and vocation should be properly integrated. He emphasised the need for education and training which he called 'Naitalim' (New training) for rural reconstruction.

In fine, Gandhian approach to rural development strives to reconstruct village republics which would be non-violent, self-governed and self-sufficient so far as the basic necessities of rurality's are concerned. Apart from creating a new socio-economic order, it Endeavour's to transform man; otherwise the changes in the socio-economic order will be short-lived.